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Contact in Sweden with a Group from the Baltic Soviet Republics

On 1 October 1959, the Soviet ship Baltik arrived in Stockholm. Aboard was a group of Balts composed of eight Latvians, eight Lithuanians, and eight Estonians.

On 2 October, I was successful in meeting three members of this group at Hotel Malmen, namely BERZAJIS (formerly VINTERS), vice-manager of the Riga Dramatic Threater; Engineer BACHS, of the Division of Forestry and Land Improvement; and Engineer BERGMANIS, of the Popov Radio Factory.

They painted a rosy picture of conditions in Latvia, referring constantly to the cultural and economic progress made. "In 12 years, we will have the same standard of living as the US. In technology we are far ahead already," said Engineer BERGMANIS. All of the human lives sacrificed were blamed on Stalin, while Khrushchev was praised as the rescuer. They admitted that mistakes could be made, as, for example, with the kolkhozes, but this had already been corrected. One learns from one's mistakes. If it comes to the worst, one obtains bread from the Ukraine. Latvia has become primarily an industrial country, although it has no raw materials. The population of Riga was estimated at about 800,000. They also admitted that letters were still censored, but this was necessary for the sake of the security of the country, which was also the case with the restrictions on travel. They denied that the present regime could exist only with support from Soviet bayonets.

In other respects, they desired to show themselves patriotic people, and spoke in derogatory terms about the author Vilis LACIS and his novels.

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The information on Hungary had been very deficient, and when they learned the real story, they were very upset. They knew nothing about Pasternak. Their arguments were very weak, consisting mostly of parroted phrases on the Communist pattern. They were astonished at the cultural progress made [in Sweden] by the immigrants. They had believed that the Latvian children [in Sweden] would not know the Latvian language.

The conversation was quiet, and without explosive outbursts. This indicates that the gentlemen in question are in sympathy with the present regime. However, whether or not these are their real thoughts and opinions is not at all clear. After they return home, what they experienced and heard will no doubt make its impression and cause speculation.

On 3 October, I learned that an acquaintance of mine, Pauls DUCMANIS, was among the excursionists. I telephoned him at Hotel Malmen. He knew me, and promised to meet me at the hotel at 2000 hours. He did not have much time because he was going to an official banquet. We sat in my car about half an hour, rapidly covering the more general subjects in our conversation. We agreed to meet the next day.

On 4 October, we met at the city hall at 2130 hours. We went to the Strand Restaurant for supper, and drove to my home at 2230. He returned to Malmen Hotel at 0030. The time was too short to cover everything in our conversations, and we agreed to meet again on 10 October, when they would return to Stockholm after visits to Goeteborg and Malmoe.

Pauls DUCMANIS is 38 years of age. His height is about 1.78 meters; he has dark hair, parted on the left side, a triangular face, brown eyes, a

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slightly upturned nose with two warts on the left side. Divorced from his first wife and remarried; three children (two by his first wife, one by the second). He lives in Meza Parks (a villa district outside Riga). His parents are dead. One of his uncles, a former senator and publisher, died after being deported to Siberia; the other uncle, Paul DUCMANIS, a teacher, lives somewhere in the West; and he [Pauls DUCMANIS] asked me to try to locate him.

I became acquainted with P.D. in Daugavpils, where he edited the local newspaper 1941-1942. At that time, he made no secret of belonging to the "Perkonkrusts" organization. Later, he was editor of the newspaper Kuldigas Vestnesis in Kuldiga and war correspondent with the 19th Latvian division. After the capitulation, he was a prisoner of war in the USSR, working in a prisoner of war camp at Leningrad. After his return home, he lived in Riga without registering. He pointed out that Riga was the best "forest" [hideout place?]. When amnesty was declared, he was able to legalize himself, and life began anew. Gradually, he began writing for the Riga sports newspaper. He is now employed by the newspaper Rigas Balss as editor of the information [news?] section. Knowing several languages, he also does translations. Previously, he had sought contact, from Latvia, with Colonel JANUM's daughter, Velta, in West Germany, whom he knows very well, and with the family of Author GRIN, in Stockholm. During his stay in Stockholm, he has met the families, GRIN, A. KRODER, and A. JOHANSON, and wished to meet the A. BERZINS, and D. SODUM families.

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P. D. gave the following account of life in Latvia:

The last period in Kurland Fortress was very difficult and full of bitterness. The leading officers ~~had~~ divided the ministerial portfolios, fled Kurland, leaving the soldiers to their fate. The next stage was that following the capitulation, which, with its atrocities and violence, ravaged the whole country. The people was forced to its knees. But at the most difficult of times, people still hope. Rumors spread concerning all sorts of aid -- Americans, Englishmen, and even Swedes were exptected to arrive. All this was in vain; all that remained was the desire to survive. The oppression, the deportations, the uncertainty increased from day to day. The forests were full of people who wished to live to see the day when help would arrive. The months became years, and the possibility of surviving in the forests became slight. Some people fled to the wild forests of Lithuania and Poland, others turned themselves in to the occupation authorities. In 1949, there were new deportations and more suffering. And so things went until Stalin's death. The death of the great tyrant aroused hope of a revolution [or] radical changes, but these expectations were not fulfilled. Gradually, especially after the fall of Beria, certain changes were noted. The amnesty was proclaimed; the head men of the NKVD were replaced. Life became somewhat more normal. Nobody needed be uneasy at night -- the NKVD had stopped its night raids. One who stands at the edge of a precipice takes the slightest improvement as a great gift. Nobody was arrested without cause; there was food to be bought and work to be had -- meaning that there was a chance for life and survival. And it should not be forgotten that human beings wish to live.

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The Hungarian and Polish crises of 1956, even as touched upon by the Soviet radio, stirred people up. Some people listened to foreign broadcasts. There were new rumors, hopes, whisperings, and timetables for the most daring undertakings -- all in vain. One needed only to listen to "The Voice of America" ["Amerikas balss"] to realize what a fool one had been. After the years of oppression and humiliation, one was a dreamer and an idealist who believed in illusions, or rather, one believed in what one wished to believe and had expected. One pulls back into one's shell. One feels deceived, humiliated and abandoned by one's friends, from whom help and rescue had been exptected. This is worse than suffering at the hands of the enemy. One must abandon all hope and instead adjust oneself to as frictionless a co-existence with the Russians as possible. To read, to study, and to get a better job -- in this way one gains honors and a good living. The intelligentsia should not hold back; they must take the best position, or the Russians will take them instead. Nobody believes in an internal revolution. The youth grows up in the spirit of the new regime. They have heard stories of free Latvia. The young people are serious and industrious, most of them attend higher educational institutions; they know that lifes gives them nothing free. Nationalism is very pronounced among the young people. They never permit anyone to scoff at their country or their people, be the scoffer a Russian, a Chinese, or a Swede.

P.D. would like to maintain contact with me -- to write me and to send books. His home address being unsuitable for foreign mail, he would give me

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another address. In reply to my question whether he wished to correspond with me outside of the censorship, he said that this would serve no purpose. All hope is gone. I stressed that the time might come when it might be of great importance to know people who think like himself. To this, P.D. replied that in the event there was a radical change, he would be prepared for anything -- his old idealism is still buried within him.

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